


# A comradely politics of gestational work: Militant particularism, sympoetic scholarship and the limits of generosity

Dialogues in Human Geography  
2018, Vol. 8(3) 333–339  
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DOI: 10.1177/2043820618800603  
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**Sophie A Lewis**  
Independent Scholar, USA

## Abstract

In response to the four commentaries on ‘Cyborg uterine geography’, in which I argued normatively for reorganizing gestation on the basis of comradeliness, I grapple with three overlapping conceptual areas highlighted: the ethical and political affordances of the term ‘generosity’ in relation to care and pregnancy; the methodological question of bringing insights from the uterine field of ‘sympoeisis’ (‘making-with’, Haraway (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.) into the practice of scholarship; and the desire for more place-based specificity in the mapping of uterine geographies (plural, rather than singular; ‘normal’, as well as ‘queer’). Throughout this reply, I tie my remarks back to the core framework I advance in my piece, of gestation being work which, as such, has no predetermined gender, is subject to transformation through struggle, should not be romanticized (for instance, by identifying it with ‘the biological maternal’). Firstly, I rethink what it means to valorize gestational relationality in terms of generousness, from an antiwork perspective. Secondly, I engage the question, ‘can uterine geographies also create a methodology of engagement?’ while seeking to qualify the proposed embrace of ‘indeterminacy’. Thirdly, I respond to concerns about the ‘universality’ in my piece by considering some contemporary examples of uterine politicization, specifically around abortion, that suggest to me that specificity has served as the matrix through which a ‘militant particularism’ (Harvey and Williams (1995) *Militant particularism and global ambition. Social Text* 42(Spring): 69–98.) can emerge in the form of geographically far-flung Reproductive Justice solidarities.

## Keywords

abortion, antiwork, generosity, indeterminacy, queer geographies

## Uterine geographers

Robyn Longhurst, Heidi Nast, Kath Browne and Maria Fannin’s reflections honour me and thicken geography’s sense of itself as responsible to the sticky labour of anthrogenesis. To foreground a few

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### Corresponding author:

Sophie A Lewis, 4815 Baltimore ave. 3R, Philadelphia, PA 19143, USA.

Email: [sophie.anne.lewis@gmail.com](mailto:sophie.anne.lewis@gmail.com)

salient elements of what else was said: Longhurst is sceptical of my claim that feminist geographers lack an active verb to describe the work of being pregnant and doubts that the verb ‘to gestate’ is it, noting that the pregnant women she has interviewed did not talk about ‘gestating’. Browne feels that while I assert ‘a normal prosthesis-free family does not exist’, my actual illustrations don’t seem to ‘queer “normal”’ because they involve (exclusively) ‘trans-communalities’. Meanwhile, Fannin takes issue with my strategy of adopting biologist Suzanne Sadedin’s agonistic, anti-generosity narration of pregnancy as a way of advancing those aims. Pregnancy, I am reminded, is ‘hardly presented in modern medical contexts as an entirely risk-free process’. Far from iconoclastic, the basic tenets of the ‘war in the womb’ story are actually ‘overfamiliar’ and – Fannin argues – have to be understood as complicit in ongoing ‘structural violence aimed at [some] birth givers’ in the broader social and political field. In other words: I should at minimum have prolonged my attack on the demonization of pregnancy if I was going to focus so much criticism on its romanticization (I address this point in-depth in the next section).

Heidi Nast, for her part, reacts passionately against my (antiwork) approach of articulating gestational labour qua work. In the first instance Nast is, as she indicates, entirely opposed to the cyborg, Donna Haraway’s dialectic figuration of colonized embodiment, which Nast (mis)reads instead as an impossible fusion of opposites. Nast is clearly unpersuaded by my case for looking at the cyborgicity of uterine labour relationality (i.e. its imbricatedness with ecology, animality, racial techno-capital and imperialism, as well as its immanent potential for anti-colonial postgender proletarian resistance). Indeed, Nast argues that such relationality doesn’t exist prepartum. For me, this is not about fetal subjecthood (which I, too, reject) but about how looking at gestational work – its distributedness and mixity, its part-conscious and part-‘autonomic’ character – helps us understand something about labour more generally. That is, looking at the sociobiological matrix of the uterine (not ‘the biological maternal’) helps us dissolve the putative opposition between production and reproduction. In contrast, Nast reaffirms the importance

of this orthodox opposition between female productive labour and female reproductive labour (‘female labor...[as opposed to] pregnancy’). Like the romantic (and, I would argue, structurally transphobic) dichotomy of ‘the Machine’ and ‘the maternal’ on which her analysis persistently rests, this opposition is one I consider to uncritically accept capitalism’s abstraction of labour to time. Unsurprisingly, it eats itself anyway, with Nast ultimately treating the creativity of pregnancy as a demographer might: as mechanical productivity.

As we do labour, labour does us back. As Longhurst hopefully perceives, the purpose of my use of abstruse language like ‘metamorphosis’ and ‘sym-poetic’ is to get at that uncanny dynamic in pregnancy, which eludes a subject/object division. I am convinced of the insufficiency of the commonplaces at our disposal – formulations like ‘to be with child’, ‘to be expecting’ and ‘to have children’, which circle around the exterior of the gestating body and conceal its creativity. Even ‘to be pregnant’ only credits the condition passively to the actor who, having failed to be ‘impregnable’, was ‘impregnated’. The risk Longhurst identifies is that we erect, in language, a sovereign subject of gestation that, for some gestators, simply feels like a lie. Yet *some* gestators do call what they are doing *gestating* and, for me, politically, that’s enough. Besides, the word ‘gestate’ once denoted horse-riding! *Gest* or *geste* in Old French meant ‘famous deed or exploit’ (as in: *chansons de geste*). So, to *geste*-ate evokes to me a metalevel of action, a doing of doings or saddling of exploits and exploitations, where the fetus participates in the *gesture*.

It’s true that, far more than mine, Robyn Longhurst’s studies of everyday corporeal boundary trouble do a great job of ‘queering normal’. I did not look, as I could have done, at the weirdness and excess of the British Royal Family’s choreography of its members’ gestational labours (this is the subject of photographer Natalie Lennard’s series *Birth Undisturbed*, 2017). Rather, I looked to the circumstances of Maggie Nelson’s pregnancy and to the domestic mothering practices of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha Johnson as my key inspirations for ‘Cyborg uterine geography’. But, thinking back, I didn’t choose those examples because they were or weren’t ‘normal’. Rather, I chose them because they

were *normatively* appealing to me: they were comradely. I take Browne's point, however, and I will turn presently to a case of a heterosexual marriage in which the biochemical aggressions of a septic miscarriage, combined with the violence of an anti-feminist juridical system, hold the entrails of a would-be mother prisoner and fail to let them go.

Fannin asks whether 'the uterine' for me is primarily a heuristic metaphor intended to allow social reproduction theorists to include 'everything about "holding and letting go" in a single "uterine" frame' – or, alternatively, a material–semiotic assemblage whose literal referent is a 'biology' that I myself persuade her isn't actually known to us '...yet!' Perversely enough, I absolutely loved this deft problematization, despite not knowing quite how to answer it (...yet!). I keenly appreciate how it lays bare a number of the contradictions and latencies in my articulation of the matter. While I prepare to re-gestate all this via the intellectual multi-placenta that is this forum, I can only say, somewhat ruefully, that Fannin is right: I believe I mean 'all of the above'.

### Agonism in/or generosity?

Fannin's powerful problematization of my critique of 'generosity' narratives demands far more extensive treatment than what I'll begin to offer here. Unlike gestating, the word 'generous' historically denoted a passive ontological state, namely, the condition of being 'of noble birth' (from the Latin *genus*, as in *genesis* and *pro-genitor*). Generosity was essentially *noblesse oblige*. That is, the word's senses of unselfishness and bounty – effectively their only senses today – originally stemmed from these virtues' close association with elite 'race or stock'. In reality, of course, it is reliably the precarious *lower* classes in society who turn out to practice the most charity. But the concept of generosity, in its very construction, still reflects the injustices of a class society that disproportionately recognizes the beneficence of the moneyed, high-born, celebrated and pedigreed. As Fannin's questions remind me, Rosalyn Diprose knows this all too well. In *Corporeal Generosity*, Diprose illustrates the paradox whereby, in order to demonstrate generosity (as opposed to selflessness) one has to be recognized as individually

self-possessed and sovereign; yet to even be recognized as such in the first place, a feminine subject has to first demonstrate generosity. Received models of generosity are raced and gendered, such that some of us 'seem to be incapable of giving anything except that which already belongs to someone else or that which must be extracted by force' (2002: 56).

While unsparingly demolishing both the contractual and the moral–volitional models of generosity, Diprose still insists on a third, liberatory version. An emancipatory generosity, she avers, 'is not the expenditure of one's possession but the dispossession of oneself, the being-given to others that undercuts any self-contained ego' (2002: 4). It is essentially *this* radical generosity that Myra Hird takes up, too, in her theorization of the corporeality of pregnancy in terms of 'impetuousness, recklessness' (2007: 5), 'excess, unknowability and openness' (9). It signifies a constitutive openness to the other that doesn't have to be accepted, received or even recognized in order to matter (in fact, it often goes 'unanticipated and unrecognized'; Hird, 2007: 6). It brings to mind Maggie Nelson's willingness 'to go to pieces' (2015: 134). Hird visits touchstone texts of feminism that revile the parasitism of the fetus; but clearly maintains, with Diprose, that even the unconscious and unwilling dynamics of gestating can be usefully framed in terms of gifting and generosity.

Fannin asks that I consider the possibility that the rhetoric of maternal generosity 'counter[s] the characterisation of gestation as a naturally unfolding process of competition and antagonism that underwrites all human beginnings'. My doubts persist, as follows: Can a coerced, parasited generosity militate against those damaging naturalizing characterizations of labour? Can a victim, a technology, be meaningfully generous? Can workers be truly hospitable, under capitalism? Fannin mentions the 'caveat' that acts of generosity or hospitality are not always welcomed or possible. This, for me, is absolutely key. I submit that adopting an alternative topos – such as comradeship – might enable us to better frame the politics of the strange combination of activeness, passivity, automation, intention, refusal, extraction, parasitism, care and violence at the placental interface. When I gestate, the question for me is how to be a *comradely* cohabitant and

adversary and nurse and environment and even competitor to my fetus(es), all at once.

The putative novelty of modern ‘infertility solutions’ inheres precisely in their partial evacuation of the whole question of generosity, of motherliness, from the labour of gestating. It is tempting, as a feminist academic, to seek to simply reverse this denial of generosity in the name of valorizing and making it visible, by analogy with motherhood. But is generosity, or exploitation, the truer representation of gestational service’s horizons? It is worth recalling that Angela Davis didn’t think the so-called New Reproductive Technologies were all that ‘new’: Hadn’t Black women long served as surrogates on the American plantation (Davis, 1998)? Put another way: an enslaved person *cannot* be meaningfully generous; it is politically irresponsible to valorize her generosity. But comradeship is different. While motherhood in the United States was elaborated as an institution of married White womanhood, Black slaves could make no claim of kinship or property to the fruits of their gestational labours. They could, however, be *comradely* to those infants. To this day, these fundamental racial and class dynamics continue to trouble the commonplace certainty (*mater semper certa est*) that gestation ‘naturally’ produces the status of motherhood for the gestator in the United States.

This raises the question of whether it *should*: Whether motherhood and pregnancy per se are viable cornerstones – as Nast assumes they are – of a liveable world. Orna Donath highlights that there is an epidemic of ‘regretting motherhood’ in the Western world (Donath, 2017). Erica Millar documents how abortions are overwhelmingly *happy* experiences (Millar, 2017). Yet hegemonic culture remains as natalist and repro-normative as ever, and the infertility industry, throwing every last resource at the achievement of individual pregnancies, shores up the desire for a biogenetic babe-of-one’s-own under the guise of catering to it. On the other hand, radicals such as Alexis Pauline Gumbs are reviving traditions of ‘polymaternalism’ (where each child has many mothers, of whatever gender) as evidence of the ‘queerness’ and communistic anti-propertarianism of some long-standing Black kinship practices (Gumbs et al., 2016; Lewis, 2018). Doing away with

parental possessiveness, fostering a comradeship relation between adults and children instead: This was the arc of 1970s gay liberation’s politics of family abolition. It’s the key point of much of the speculative science fiction Nast notices me ‘skipping over’ in this particular piece: For instance, Marge Piercy’s vision of a society that has automated gestation and communized child-rearing (‘kid-binding’) in *Woman on the Edge of Time* (Piercy, 1983). And it was, of course, the oft-forgotten crux of Shulamith Firestone’s idiosyncratic proposals in *The Dialectic of Sex* (Firestone, 2015). It is clear from Donath’s accounts that one can be comradeship in a situation characterized, among other things, by regret and antagonism – most mothers manage to be so at least some of the time – even as your fetus ‘runs you over like a truck’ (Nelson, 2015: 134). As the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers proclaimed, children ‘will not belong to the patriarchy. They will not belong to us either. They will belong only to themselves’.

## Sympoietic methods

Children are at stake to *all of us* because we all shape and make them (even while they, as well as everyone else, are doing the same for, to and through us). The term sympoiesis (*making-with*) is an attempt to summarize this core characteristic of social reproduction, understood as a matrix of co-creative and co-destructive labour. Writing is sympoietic: While the name on the byline of the article is mine, the various mutually incompatible thoughts that gestated its contents, like the labours that gestated (all the way into adulthood) the thinkers of those ongoing thoughts, are many. Mario Biagioli puts it well in his essay comparing gestational surrogacy with intellectual plagiarism: ‘authorship can only be coauthorship’ (2014: 84). Sympoiesis can be a curse as well as a blessing. While the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers espoused a commoning, communizing politics in relation to children, it is perfectly possible to remove those determinations from the idea of sympoiesis, anchoring it instead to fascist values or to the thoroughgoing ‘indeterminacy’ to which Kath Browne is committed.

I have struggled to understand what differentiates Browne’s caution that ‘it is in the collective, and particularly societal responsibility for uterine values,

that unwelcome interventions and restrictions can lie' from a rejection of the problem of politics per se – the problem of living with and through others. Asks Browne: 'Can uterine geographies also create a methodology of engagement based in indeterminacy?' When I said that the relationship between feminist struggle and the uterus 'should be treated as open to determination' I also meant that it should be (re)determined. My noting that, in Myra Hird's pro-generosity approach, 'the relational result of gestation is normatively determinate', was not a critique of her normativity per se but of its not going far enough: Hird presumes that production by gestation of a mother–baby bond is a good thing, just by itself. I wanted to pose the question of *which bonds?* (as well as answering it: comradely ones, not *necessarily* involving the gestator in any particularly privileged way).

Robyn Longhurst writes that she is 'not entirely sure how focusing on the uterus might help to ensure that more non-normative accounts of care and social reproduction emerge'. Again, I do not seek to foster merely 'non-normative' accounts in my community. My account is intensely normative. This divergence explains why Longhurst brings up the abusive and filthy-rich Londoner Edina (from *Ab Fab*) in the context of my call to 'deromanticize'. Longhurst puts the 'bad' in 'bad mothers' in scare quotes and suggests that such figures, or their representation in popular culture, 'may have something to offer'. While I laugh heartily at (and with) Edina, the point I was attempting to make was that bad mothers – abusive, exploitative, policing, bourgeois, phobic, violent mothers, sans scare quotes – are a real political problem. It is understandable that leftists and feminists should focus all their energies on defending mothers (especially single, teen, working-class, migrant, addicted, incarcerated, welfare-recipient mothers) from the charge of 'bad mother'. I don't for one second suggest that the effort to combat their institutional ill-treatment and humiliation should stop; rather, I insist we can oppose capitalist anti-mother policy without falling into pro-motherhood. Focusing on the uterus in such a way as to centre the goal of family abolition (which includes motherhood abolition) – and what Treva Ellison calls 'trans reproductive labour' (Ellison, 2017) – is a strategy intended to immanently

carry forward the sense in which pregnancy will be, albeit bloody, also latently anti-capitalist.

I can see Browne is being fair when she points out 'it is a stretch' for me to have suggested radical geographers 'collude' in mistaking pregnancy for what Maggie Nelson calls 'the ultimate conformity' or that they've not been interested in mapping the uterine. I wonder if I myself mistook pregnancy for the ultimate conformity for some time – and projected my shortcomings onto a discipline that is in fact full of unruly corporeographies! While I disagree (as will be clear from the above discussion) with Browne's implication that thinking with the uterus could easily be made to 'rework our [scholarly] engagements with each other' in such a way that academia would become more *generous* rather than less, the point is well-taken that a call to commit to a comradely 'holding and letting go' should practice what it preaches. Browne reminds me that 'these authors, academics and people have laid the groundwork'. I agree; and to the extent that my critique became 'chastisement' I fell short of the norms of sympoetic scholarship to which I aspire.

## Militant particulars

Robyn Longhurst indicates that she would like to see more attention to 'the specificity of the way wombs are lived in particular contexts'. The wish for a 'militant particularism' (Harvey and Williams, 1995) – albeit difficult – is undoubtedly the right line of inquiry. Clearly, geographies dictate important things like whether gestation can be opted out of (e.g. the local culture around abortion, the quality and accessibility of healthcare provisioning, and law), even if these contexts do not predict the phenomenological experience of pregnancy in a consistent way. Some gestators feel, like Sylvia Plath, that 'a black force [is] blotting out my brain and utterly possessing me' (Plath, 2001); while others breezily refer to themselves as 'an Easy-Bake oven' (Kuczynski, 2008). The difficulty stems from a near-unique peculiarity of gestational labour, which is that both upper-class and lower-class, Black and non-Black, settler and indigenous, propertied and homeless people do it (and feel wildly idiosyncratic things about it). I've read many ethnographies of

commercial gestational workplaces – in various locales in Mexico and India – and even there, within one dormitory, the diversity and specificity of gestational experience proves really difficult to condense (Deomampo, 2016; Schurr and Militz, 2018). I'd still defend the value of a singular (normative) political intervention, but wholeheartedly support the commitment called for, to 'teasing out the universal and particularities of these cyborg uterine geographies (plural rather than singular)'.

I will speak to two particularities of the cyborg uterine political landscape. Some readers of *Dialogues in Human Geography* surely felt the same shivers up their spine I felt, watching footage of crowds in Dublin chanting 'Savita, Savita' in the aftermath of the referendum on abortion held in Ireland on 27 May, 2018. The case has served – continues to serve – both as a tragic memorial and as the luminous catalyst for freer uterine geographies worldwide. Savita Halappanavar, a 31-year-old dentist, was directly killed by the Irish medico-legal establishment in 2012 as a result of being denied life-saving healthcare in the 17th week of her gestation. Her dead, though only partially miscarried fetus, which had gone septic, was legally entitled to better treatment in medical terms than was Dr Halappanavar herself – that is, it could not be removed from her – until it was too late. The vividness with which the murder rammed home the sadism of a situation of forced gestation was undoubtedly one of the factors that inspired the overwhelmingly trans-inclusive and working-class-led Irish feminist movement to push so tirelessly for the last 5 years, ensuring abortion was at long last decriminalized. From my perspective, too, the consequences of rebuffing Savita's request for an abortion highlight my article's contentions that: all reproduction is assisted; 'labour does you'; and the freedom to stop working whenever we wish is vital – even when it comes to the work of making babies who will die when we stop. Across the board, workers deserve to be rescued from their work when – as it was for Halappanavar, whose body was undertaking the process of miscarriage with lethal slowness – it is going gruesomely awry.

Since moving to the United States, where rates of death caused by gestation are about the worst in the 'developed' world, I've been acutely aware of living

in a gestational dystopia far more banal than anything envisioned in the bioconservative dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale* or its television adaptation. One-hundred fifty years since chattel slavery was formally ended in the United States, Black gestators are still three to four times more likely than White ones to die from pregnancy. This social environment – what I think we should be calling the stratified infrastructure of forced gestation – sustains itself not only thanks to racism and classism but also thanks to medical rules near-identical to those that killed Savita Halappanavar. These rules restrict what doctors in many parts of the United States can do to the 'motherfetus' organism (I take this phrase from Chikako Takeshita, 2017), dictating on pain of disbarment what must be said and done to pregnant patients, via guidelines that essentially suspend pregnant people's personhood. The priority of the so-called 'fetal personhood' is an obsession that even extends to the so-called 'preemies': fetuses who have exited the womb prematurely. It was in Philadelphia, my adoptive city, that lambs were gestated to term in ectogenetic 'bio-bags' last year in one of many experiments geared towards saving human 'preemies' (and certainly not towards the end of liberating human adults from the need to do gestational work). The very suggestion that a preference among adults – simply, to have kids but not ever get pregnant – might be sufficient justification for researching such technology is downright reviled. Female commissioning parents who hire surrogates without being 'infertile' are derided with astonishing virulence for their 'vanity'. Yet, as Arwa Mahdawi crisply attests, 'there doesn't seem to be such a stigma in [cis] men saying that there is no way they'd ever want to be pregnant' (Mahdawi, 2018).

There is cause for hope, though, since inspiration has flowed abundantly across the ocean after the overwhelming vote to repeal the 8th Amendment. In North America, the Reproductive Justice movement is gaining momentum, with radical 'full-spectrum' doulas (who assist not only birthing but dying, miscarriage and abortion) accelerating the charge to defend Medicare from Trumpian attacks (SisterSong, 2018). Left feminists in my state are organizing to expose and drive out the plague of 'Crisis Pregnancy Centers': anti-abortion missions dressed up to look

medical. Increasingly, these efforts are framed in trans-inclusive language, conceptualized by and in solidarity with transgender people. On this point, much of academia does (genuinely!) lag behind. ‘While acknowledgement that not all women are mothers is fairly commonplace, the fact that not all pregnant or potentially pregnant persons are mothers or women has yet to transform our language and conceptual frames substantively’ (Takeshita, 2017). If it is ‘chastising’ to say that heel-dragging on the part of ‘sceptics’ in my camp is doing us all harm, so be it. In her otherwise excellent *Happy Abortions*, Erica Millar asks doubtfully whether it is ‘possible or desirable’ to envisage a gender-neutral subject of pregnancy (Millar, 2017: 4). History is already overtaking her, with major medical institutions tweaking their obstetric policies (British Medical Association, 2017). *Happy Abortions* powerfully transforms our conceptual frames, showing that pregnant people ‘are not automatically mothers’. Couldn’t it therefore also help us see they aren’t automatically women, either? To do so would not rob feminist struggle of its constituency; quite the contrary. It would enable us to better notice how all of those roles (mothering, being a woman, gestating) involve partially unconscious, not readily interruptible work which can –with a little help from one’s comrades – be refused and/or redistributed.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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